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## **Representing Motherhood and Political Violence in Mexico: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of *Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad (Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity)***

By Alberto McKelligan Hernández<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the artistic production of Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder, PGN), a feminist art collective established by Mexican artists Maris Bustamante (b. 1949) and Mónica Mayer (b. 1954) in 1983. Even though scholars have examined the ways in which PGN contributed to the development of feminist art in Mexico, the existing studies have not emphasized how the collective explored political violence. To highlight this aspect of PGN's artistic practice, this article focuses on a mail art missive produced by Bustamante and Mayer as part of the extensive *¡MADRES! (Mothers!)* (1983-1987) project. *Mothers!* served as a complex series of artistic interventions that focused on the personal and social significance of motherhood. As part of *Mothers!*, PGN developed humorous artistic performances they presented in public venues and national television. The collective also produced *Egalité, Liberté, Maternité (Equality, Liberty, Motherhood)* (1987), a series of six mail art missives that were distributed to journalists, feminist activists, and members of the art world. While *Mothers!* has received considerable attention from scholars in Mexico and abroad, most of the available literature focuses on PGN's artistic performances. In contrast, this article focuses on *Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad (Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity)* (1987), a mail art missive that explored the significance of motherhood after the massacre of Tlatelolco (1968) and the disappearances of political activists. Specifically, I employ the analytical framework developed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, revealing how the activist and political context of Mexico affected PGN's mail art missive. Furthermore, I argue that PGN developed a form of feminist art that highlighted the specific challenges faced by Mexican women in the post-1968 era, even as the mail art missive also resonated with the efforts of feminist artists working in the United States. Through this analysis, I position PGN's mail art missive as a unique contribution to feminist art in a larger transnational field.

**Keywords:** Transnational feminism, Mexican feminism, Political violence, Feminist art, Motherhood, Mail art

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## Introduction

Scholars focusing on women artists of the late twentieth century have analyzed how self-identified feminist artists explored the personal and social significance of motherhood through their artistic practice (Chernick & Klein, 2011; Liss, 2009; Siegel et al., 2011). While this scholarship primarily focuses on artistic efforts in the United States and Europe, art historians and curators have increasingly considered how women artists outside these regions also produced innovative feminist artistic projects (Meskimmon, 2007; Reilly & Nochlin, 2007). In particular, the recent exhibition “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985” (Fajardo-Hill & Giunta, 2017) and the scholarship of Julia Antivilio Peña (2015) and Andrea Giunta (2018) revealed how Latin American women artists contributed to the development of feminist art within a complex transnational arena. Other studies have focused on developments in Mexico, analyzing how feminist artists in this country reflected on women’s experiences by repeatedly deploying images of the female body (Aceves Sepúlveda, 2019; Barbosa, 2008; Giunta, 2013). For instance, Araceli Barbosa (2008) discussed the works produced by Rosalba Huerta, Lucy Santiago, and Mónica Mayer for the 1977 exhibition “Collage íntimo (Intimate College)” in Mexico City. Barbosa (2008) noted that the three artists explored themes such as motherhood, women’s sexuality, and the objectification of women through collages and other mixed-media artworks.

In this article, I contribute to this growing body of literature by focusing attention on Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder, PGN), a feminist art collective established by Mexican artists Maris Bustamante (b. 1949) and Mayer (b. 1954). From 1984 to 1987, PGN developed *¡MADRES! (Mothers!)*, an extensive artistic collaboration that focused on the meaning of motherhood. According to Mayer (2011), *Mothers!* was an example of a Visual Project, a form of artistic collaboration that “integrated life, art and politics and disregarded traditional definitions of art” (p. 154). Therefore, *Mothers!* was a complex series of interventions that consisted of various sub-projects (Bustamante, 2005; Mayer, 2004, 2011). A prominent component of the project included performances in venues across Mexico City, including the Carrillo Gil Art Museum and the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Mayer, 2004, 2011). As part of *Mothers!*, PGN also organized a contest, *Carta a mi madre (Letter to My Mother)*, in which they asked the general public “to write a letter with everything they always wanted to tell their mothers but were afraid to say” (Mayer, 2011, p. 167). “Novela rosa: o me agarró el arquetipo (Romance Novel, or, the Archetype Got Me),” an exhibition of Mayer’s work at the Carrillo Gil Art Museum, marked the end of the *Mothers!* project (Mayer, 1987, 2004, 2011).

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the *Mothers!* project, emphasizing the irreverent sense of humor PGN employed in their artistic performances (Antivilio Peña, 2015; Barbosa, 2008; Blanco Cano, 2010; Carroll, 2005, 2017; Fajardo-Hill & Giunta, 2017; Giunta, 2013, 2018). In particular, this scholarship closely analyzes *Madre por un día (Mother for a Day)* (1987), a televised performance in which PGN appeared on *Nuestro mundo (Our World)*, a national television talk show hosted by Guillermo Ochoa. In this performance, the artists hoisted a prosthetic pregnancy belly onto the male television host while discussing the *Mothers!* project and the goals of their feminist art collective (Bustamante, 2008; Mayer, 2004). As emphasized by Giunta (2013, 2018), the performance allowed PGN to denaturalize understandings of gender, motherhood, and the female body.

In comparison to *Mother for a Day*, scholars have focused less attention on other components of the *Mothers!* project, including *Egalité, Liberté, Maternité (Equality, Liberty, Motherhood)* (1987), a series of six mail art missives produced by PGN (Antivilio Peña, 2015; Barbosa, 2008; Blanco Cano, 2010; Carroll, 2005, 2017; Fajardo-Hill & Giunta, 2017; Giunta,

2013, 2018). Still, in her discussion of the *Mothers!* project, Rosana Blanco Cano (2010) analyzed the contents of three works in the series, emphasizing that PGN explored maternal archetypes and bodily experiences in these artworks.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, Blanco Cano (2010) revealed how the fourth work in the series focused on the Immaculate Conception, allowing PGN to explore the relationship between this religious belief and the division of household labor in Mexican society. Through this analysis, Blanco Cano (2010) positioned PGN's mail art as a feminist intervention that challenged the normative discourses of nationhood, gender, and ethnicity that emerged in the country after the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Indeed, scholars have emphasized how women activists, government officials, and the Catholic Church debated women's social roles in the years following the revolution (Mitchell & Schell, 2007; Olcott, 2005; Olcott et al., 2006). Women activists demanded universal suffrage and more opportunities for women to engage in public and civic society (Olcott, 2005). In contrast, the post-revolutionary regime promoted a narrative of Mexican history that celebrated *mestizaje* or the racial mixing of European and indigenous culture. The state thus defined women's primary role as the literal progenitors of the country's revolutionary citizens, those who give birth to a diverse Mexican nation (Olcott, 2005). Similarly, the Catholic Church and women's religious groups emphasized the importance of women's "selfless" motherhood in the domestic sphere (Mitchell & Schell, 2007; Olcott, 2005; Olcott et al., 2006). By negotiating between these different social groups and institutions, the post-revolutionary regime solidified its control over the country, allowing the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) to dominate Mexican politics throughout the twentieth century (Langston, 2017; Mitchell & Schell, 2007; Olcott, 2005; Olcott et al., 2006). In her analysis, Blanco Cano (2010) explained how PGN's mail art missives alluded to the archetypes of motherhood which emerged as the PRI consolidated its power over the Mexican nation.

Additionally, the exhibition "Artecorreo" at the Museum of Mexico City showcased PGN's mail art missives (Marcin, 2011a). The exhibition's catalogue included an interview in which Bustamante and Mayer described the general contents of these works (Marcin, 2011b). In this interview, the artists stated that PGN aimed to challenge patriarchal social structures by producing innovative representations of women and motherhood (Marcin, 2011b). Finally, Mayer (2011) briefly summarized the contents of the missives in an examination of the *Mothers!* project, explaining some of the cultural references employed by the feminist art collective. Through this discussion, Mayer (2011) emphasized that the *Mothers!* project related to "popular sayings and specific political situations in Mexico" (p. 164).

In this article, I expand on the available literature by analyzing the last mail art missive produced as part of the *Mothers!* project: *Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad (Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity)* (1987) (Figs. 1-2). I focus on this mail art missive because of its references to political violence in Mexico, namely the student massacre of Tlatelolco (1968) and the disappearances of leftist political activists, a process scholars have described as the Mexican government's dirty war (Calderón & Cedillo, 2012; Trevizo, 2014).<sup>3</sup> These overt references to political events in post-1968 Mexico establish the work as an unusual deviation that

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<sup>2</sup> Blanco Cano analyzed the first, fourth, and fifth works in the series: *10 de mayo: ¿Sabe usted dónde está su madre? (Mother's Day: Do You Know Where Your Mother is?)*, *El misterio de la concepción o cómo hacerle para remover los asientos del difunto (On the Mysteries of Conception or How to Stir Up Accumulated Sperm)*, and *El triunfo de Mother Wars (Mother Wars: The Triumph)*.

<sup>3</sup> The Mexican dirty war paralleled similar efforts to suppress leftist and community activity across Latin America, leading to military dictatorships in countries such as Chile and Argentina (Calderón & Cedillo, 2012).

merits further analysis to understand PGN's unique contributions to the development of feminist art.

## Methodology

To reveal the significance of PGN's references to political violence, I employ the analytical framework developed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a transnational feminist scholar. In her scholarship, Mohanty underscores how academic studies have frequently characterized feminism as a single, unified movement emerging from the First World, only to be transplanted into other regions (1988, 2003). As an alternative, Mohanty (2003) urges scholars to study the parallels, or common differences, that emerge between distinct communities of women working within a complex transnational arena. Through this analysis, feminist scholars could examine the political processes that shape understandings of gender in specific locales, while still emphasizing "relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 242).

In this article, I follow Mohanty's directive, analyzing *Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity* through a lens that considers both the local and transnational contexts informing PGN's artwork. I first discuss the political events and activist efforts that set the stage for the *Mothers!* project in the 1980s, emphasizing how Mexican feminist groups examined and critiqued the role of motherhood in the country. Next, I explore the artistic development of both members of PGN, highlighting how their activities in the late 1970s informed their subsequent contributions to the *Mothers!* project. In particular, I detail how Bustamante employed feminist themes in an early graphic work that exemplifies the sardonic sense of humor also evident in PGN's mail art missive. Moreover, I discuss how Mayer's studies in Los Angeles from 1978 to 1980 familiarized her with Mother Art, a feminist art collective that explored the significance of motherhood. Finally, I focus on the textual and visual components of *Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity*, revealing how PGN employed dark humor to underscore that political violence transformed women's subjective experiences of motherhood. Additionally, I discuss the parallels between the efforts of PGN and Mother Art, analyzing these relations as an example of the common differences theorized by Mohanty. Through this analysis, I position PGN within a complex transnational network of feminist artists that sought to challenge normative understandings of motherhood through their artistic practice. This examination thus serves as a case study to understand how PGN developed a unique form of feminist art that explored the effects of political violence on mothers.

## Political Violence and Feminist Activism in Mexico

PGN's artistic activity followed the diverse forms of feminist activism that emerged in Mexico in the 1970s (Bartra et al., 2002; García et al., 2007). Ana Lau (2002), a historian, described these activist efforts as the new wave of Mexican feminist activism. Through this terminology, Lau distinguished between late twentieth-century efforts and the forms of women's activism that emerged in the country in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution.

More specifically, Lau (2002) related feminist activism of the 1970s to the student massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968. Scholars and journalists emphasize how the presidential administration of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) aimed to showcase Mexico's economic and political progress by hosting the Summer Olympics in the late 1960s, legitimizing the authoritarian rule of the PRI (Flaherty, 2016; Monsiváis & Scherer García, 1999; Poniatowska, 1975).

Throughout the summer of 1968, several student protests erupted throughout Mexico City, with high school and college students demanding changes in the country's political system.

On October 2, 1968, ten days before the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, the Mexican army opened fire on the students and protestors that had gathered at Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico. Though accounts vary, most scholars note the death of over 300 protestors, as well as countless arrests that took place in the aftermath of the massacre (Flaherty, 2016). The extreme violence deployed by the Mexican state destroyed the vision of peaceful and democratic economic progress favored by the PRI (Flaherty, 2016; Langston, 2017).

Despite the harrowing events of Tlatelolco, feminist activism flourished in the 1970s. Indeed, Rocío González Alvarado (2007) has explained how the presidential administration of Luis Echeverría (1970-76) allowed a limited resurgence of leftist political activity to disassociate itself from the massacre. Newly-established feminist groups broadly sought women's emancipation, though activists debated whether they should achieve this goal through cooperation with the authoritarian Mexican state or through the establishment of an independent movement that resisted any form of institutionalization (Lau, 2002). Feminist activism further solidified when Mexico City hosted the first United Nations World Conference on Women in 1975, prompting collaborations between different feminist groups (González Alvarado, 2007). A year after the conference, activists established the *Coalición de Mujeres Feministas* (Coalition of Feminist Women); the group focused its efforts on reproductive rights and sexual and domestic violence. The emphasis on reproductive rights partly stemmed from the provisions of Mexico's General Population Act of 1974; the law endorsed family planning services in public health clinics while not legalizing abortion (Lau, 2002). The coalition also worked on the publication of *Cihuat*, a feminist periodical (González Alvarado, 2007).<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 1970s, other feminist periodicals were established in Mexico, including *La Revuelta* (1976) and *fem* (1976) (Millán, 2014).

Before PGN developed the *Mothers!* project, several feminist activists focused on the significance of motherhood in Mexico. On September 30, 1970, activist and journalist Marta Acevedo (1970) wrote an article focused on women's activism in San Francisco that was published in *Siempre!*, a prominent Mexican periodical. While the article described feminist activism in the United States, Acevedo (1970) also urged Latin American women to consider gender inequality in their national contexts. In particular, Acevedo (1970) emphasized how the unrelenting tasks associated with the maintenance of a household and child-rearing prevented women's full participation in society. The publication of Acevedo's article prompted Mexican women to consider the ways in which society characterized motherhood in the country (Aceves, 2013).

Indeed, in 1971, a group of women gathered at the Mother's Monument in Mexico City to protest the idealized representations of motherhood circulating in mass media (Aceves, 2013).<sup>5</sup> In a series of columns published in *fem*, *La Revuelta*, and *Cihuat*, activists further denounced the ways in which Mexican society constrained women by celebrating an idealized form of domestic motherhood (Colectivo Cinematográfico, 1977; "La madre vale madre...", 1977; M. L. E., 1977). The column in *La Revuelta* specifically argued that Mexican society positioned selfless motherhood as the only valid task for women, institutionalizing the veneration of a mythic ideal ("La madre vale madre...", 1977). Feminist activists, journalists, and writers thus denounced the

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<sup>4</sup> *Cihuat* was the term for women in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs, who dominated the region of present-day Mexico before the establishment of a Spanish Empire in the 1500s ("Trayectoria," 1977, p. 1).

<sup>5</sup> The Mother's Monument—inaugurated in 1949 by government officials—featured a large-scale representation of a mother carrying her child. Feminist groups of the 1970s and later decades repeatedly staged events at the site because of its symbolic potential (Barbosa, 2008).

prevailing representations of motherhood that occluded decades of women's activism and political mobilization after the Mexican Revolution (Mitchell & Schell, 2007; Olcott, 2005; Olcott et al., 2006).

Feminist examinations of motherhood continued to emerge throughout the 1980s, nearly coinciding with the establishment of PGN and the *Mothers!* project. In 1982, Acevedo (1982) published *El 10 de mayo (The 10<sup>th</sup> of May)*, a book-length study that examined the history of Mother's Day celebrations in Mexico. In this text, she argued that the holiday emerged as a reaction against women's political activism after the Mexican Revolution (Acevedo, 1982). In particular, Acevedo (1982) emphasized the importance of the First Feminist Congress of 1916, a large-scale gathering of feminist activists which took place in the southern state of Yucatán. Notably, feminist Hermila Galindo shocked congress attendants by demanding women's participation in the political realm and denouncing sexual double standards (Olcott, 2005). Acevedo (1982) thus argued that the Mexican government, Catholic Church, and private entrepreneurs countered women's activism with the establishment of a national holiday that celebrated selfless, domestic motherhood in the early 1920s. A few years after the publication of *The 10<sup>th</sup> of May*, *fem* (1984-1985) published a special issue focused on motherhood, further exploring the topic through the lens of psychology, sociology, and economics. The special issue also included writings by Madres Libertarias, a collective that explicitly focused on the relationship between feminism and motherhood. According to the group's statement, Madres Libertarias sought to encourage feminism among Mexican mothers, redefining parenting as a social responsibility shared by men and women (Madres Libertarias, 1984-1985).

In short, feminist writers and activists of the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the necessity of transforming the significance of motherhood in the country, encouraging a social transformation that would provide women with more opportunities in the private and public spheres of life. PGN's *Mothers!* project thus paralleled a larger activist movement that sought to challenge conventional understandings of motherhood.

### **Bustamante and Mayer before *Mothers!***

In the years before the official establishment of PGN, Bustamante and Mayer produced artistic projects that resonated with the themes explored by post-1968 feminist activists (Aceves Sepúlveda, 2019; Fajardo-Hill & Giunta, 2017; Giunta, 2018). Moreover, as I emphasize below, both artists showcased an interest in developments in the international art world, producing artistic projects for audiences outside of Mexico.

Bustamante's participation in PGN was not her first foray into art collectives. In 1977, she was a founding member of No Grupo, an art collective active from 1977 to 1983; the group consisted of Bustamante, Melquiades Herrera, Alfredo Núñez, and Rubén Valencia (Bustamante, 2005). According to Bustamante (2011), No Grupo "developed a caustic and sarcastic form of humor through which we made fun of almost everything we saw" (p. 308). In 1977, curator Helen Escobedo selected a number of art collectives to represent Mexico in the X Paris Youth Biennial (Henaro, 2011). When No Grupo was not selected, the collective decided to participate remotely, sending cardboard masks of its members to the biennial so that audiences could wear them as they walked throughout the exhibition (Henaro, 2011). In this manner, No Grupo bypassed Escobedo's institutional authority, inserting their artistic proposal into the international art world of the late 1970s.

In 1982, the collective traveled to Colombia “to participate in the First Latin American Symposium of Non-Objectual Art” (Bustamante, 2008, p. 145). The year before their visit, No Grupo established connections with M-19, a Colombian militant organization, further revealing how Bustamante and her peers strived to collaborate with artists and activists from Latin America (Henaro, 2011). While in Colombia, the Mexican collective traveled with members of M-19 to the University of Antioquia to learn more about Colombia’s politics (Henaro, 2011). The following year, No Grupo and M-19 produced *Agenda Colombia 83*, a publication showcasing graphic works produced by forty different artists (Henaro, 2011). The Mexican art collectives of Proceso Pentágono and Grupo Mira also participated in this project. Several of the artists in this publication employed haphazard photographic collages, drawings, and other graphic techniques to illustrate the physical and political violence associated with military repression (Henaro, 2011).

The image produced by Bustamante for *Agenda Colombia 83* anticipated the humorous visual strategies she would later employ in the *Mothers!* project, even as it also resonated with the works produced by her fellow Latin American artists (fig. 3). In this work, Bustamante included photo-realistic representations of clothespins, highlighting the tools associated with domestic labor. Below these clothespins, she presented a photographic reproduction of Karl Marx’s face, placing the image within a loose sketch of the Mona Lisa. The artist drew an apron over the haphazard human figure, presenting this clothing item with the dotted lines of paper dolls. Moreover, Bustamante included a prominent word balloon for the Marx figure: “¡mujeres del mundo: uníos!” (“women of the world: unite!”) (my translation). Through this composition, Bustamante paralleled the critiques of domestic labor developed by Mexican feminist activists of the post-1968 era. Indeed, according to Lisette González Juárez (2007), several feminist groups of the 1970s and 1980s argued that the unrelenting tasks associated with housekeeping and childrearing hindered women’s participation in society. Similarly, Bustamante’s contribution to *Agenda Colombia 83* underscored how women should unite against the oppression of household labor.

Mayer also had a substantial artistic career before the establishment of PGN. Existing studies highlight the importance of her studies at the National Fine Arts School and her involvement in feminist activism in Mexico throughout the 1970s (Álvarez Romero, 2016; Barbosa, 2008; Mayer, 2004, 2010). In particular, Mayer (2004, 2010) has stressed her contributions to the Coalition of Feminist Women, including her participation in a reproductive rights protest in 1977. Additionally, scholars and curators have analyzed the participatory artistic projects Mayer developed in the late 1970s, emphasizing how these works explored women’s experiences and issues such as sexual harassment and violence (Aceves Sepúlveda, 2019; Álvarez Romero, 2016; Barbosa, 2008; Fajardo-Hill & Giunta, 2017; Giunta, 2013, 2018; Mayer, 2004, 2010).

According to Mayer (2004, 2010), her interest in feminist art and activism led her to the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles. The Woman’s Building, established in 1973, aimed to challenge the institutional sexism that predominated in other art institutions, serving as a cultural center established by and for women (Hale & Wolverton, 2011; Linton & Maberry, 2011). The institution also housed the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), an art school established in 1973 by Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. In an early description of the FSW, Chicago (1977) emphasized how the institution was “the first entirely independent alternate structure for women in the art-related professions” (p. 192). From 1978 to 1980, Mayer completed graduate studies at the FSW (Mayer 2004, 2010). During these two years, she worked closely with



Suzanne Lacy, becoming a member of Ariadne, the feminist art collective established by the latter artist in 1977 (Álvarez Romero, 2016; Mayer, 2004, 2010).

During her studies in Los Angeles, Mayer was simultaneously enrolled at Goddard College, writing a master's thesis with Lacy as her advisor (Mayer, 2016). In this document, Mayer (1980) constructed a detailed history of the Woman's Building and the FSW, emphasizing the ways in which feminist artists of the 1970s explored the political significance of personal experiences. As part of this discussion, Mayer (1980) focused her attention on Mother Art, one of the feminist art collectives that emerged at the FSW. Jan Cook, Christie Kruse, Suzanne Siegel, Helen Million, and Laura Silagi—all mothers and students at the FSW—established the collective in 1973 (Moravec, 2011). According to Jeanne S.M. Willette (2011), “[t]he mothers of Mother Art bonded when the Feminist Studio Workshop... allowed dogs but not children on the premises... the denial of the real lives of real women was also a denial of feminist principles of opportunity” (p. 7). By exploring their identities as mothers, artists, and feminists, members of this collective anticipated the feminist reevaluations of motherhood later developed by scholars such as Adrienne Rich in her text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Indeed, by naming the collective “Mother Art,” the artists asserted the value of the contributions made by mothers within the FSW. In her master's thesis, Mayer (1980) detailed two major projects developed by Mother Art: *Rainbow Playground* (1974) and *Laundryworks* (1977). Mother Art built *Rainbow Playground* in the FSW's parking lot; the playground provided a safe space for the students' children while their mothers completed their studies (Moravec, 2011; Siegel et al., 2011). *Laundryworks* consisted of a series of performances that Mother Art presented in the city's laundromats; each of these performances lasted the average time of a washing and drying cycle (Moravec, 2011; Siegel et al., 2011).

Mayer's familiarity with Mother Art further encourages a form of feminist analysis that explores the parallels between this feminist art collective and PGN. As I will argue in my analysis of *Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity*, both feminist art collectives explored the significance of motherhood through their artistic practice, establishing their independent efforts as a prominent example of the common differences theorized by Mohanty (2003). By exploring the relations between PGN and Mother Art, I foreground the ways in which PGN's artistic practice aligned them with feminist artists working in the United States, even while Bustamante and Mayer developed a form of art that directly addressed the challenges faced by Mexican women.

### **PGN and *Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity***

After her studies at the FSW, Mayer returned to Mexico City, beginning her collaborations with Bustamante in the early 1980s. As explained by Bustamante (2005), the two artists sought to identify other women artists who might want to collaborate on an extensive feminist artistic campaign:

We organized a meeting with about eighty women artists.... When we realized that none of those present at the meeting was interested in the project, we learned that there were only two possibilities: to forget the entire idea or for the two of us to continue by ourselves. (p. 236)

The collective was formally established in 1983 with Bustamante, Mayer, and Herminia Dosal, though the latter left PGN shortly after (Mayer, 2004). Bustamante (2008) and Mayer

(2004) later explained how the collective's name was meant as a humorous reference to traditional *polvos*, or powders, a common remedy against the evil eye in Mexican folk traditions.

In 1984, PGN began working on the *Mothers!* project (Antivilio Peña, 2015; Barbosa, 2008; Blanco Cano, 2010; Carroll, 2005, 2017; Fajardo-Hill & Giunta, 2017; Giunta, 2013, 2018). More specifically, PGN worked on the six mail art missives collectively known as *Equality, Liberty, Motherhood* throughout 1987 (Marcin, 2011a). Describing the production of these missives, Mayer emphasized how the collective employed simple materials:

The letters were black-and-white photocopies printed in letter-sized paper, which we then stuffed into an envelope. Sometimes it was just the single sheet of paper, photocopied on both sides, and sometimes with another photocopy scrap pasted on. Sometimes we included confetti. (M. Mayer, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

In the interview conducted by Mauricio Marcin for the “Artecorreo” exhibition, Mayer emphasized how the production of the missives had been an enjoyable and humorous process (Marcin, 2011b). Additionally, Bustamante noted that PGN's humor was part of their overall artistic strategy, as the artists believed that if they explored feminist issues through a solemn perspective, few people would be interested (Marcin, 2011b). PGN sent their mail art missives to a broad variety of individuals, hoping to disseminate their feminist messages throughout Mexican society. According to Mayer (2011), about 350 individuals received the missives, including journalists, feminist activists, and members of the art world. In particular, Mayer remembers sending the works to prominent feminist activist Ana Victoria Jiménez, television anchor Guillermo Ochoa, and newspaper journalists Angélica Abelleira and Elda Maceda (M. Mayer, personal communication, February 2, 2019).

*Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity* reveals PGN's interest in exploring feminist issues through a humorous perspective, even as Bustamante and Mayer underscored the political violence deployed by the Mexican state. In this work, PGN described a prominent politician using unusual and irreverent language. On the first page of the missive, the artists included a photographic reproduction of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Mexico's president from 1988 to 1994; the image appears within a hand-drawn picture frame that appears to hang from a nail (Fig. 1). The contrast between the photograph and the simple frame is further heightened by the loose handwritten caption below the image, which states: “Felicitamos: al PRI por su más reciente descubrimiento artístico” (“We congratulate: The PRI for their most recent artistic discovery”) (my translation). The celebratory message ends with the full name and title of the portrayed politician: “C. Lic. Carlos Salinas de Gortari.”

Through this caption, PGN alluded to the official announcement of Salinas as the PRI's presidential candidate, which took place on October 4, 1987. The announcement was an example of the *dedazo*, or the finger tapping, an infamous tradition in Mexican politics. As explained by Joy Kathryn Langston (2017), the *dedazo* was “the informal right of the president to select his own successor as the PRI's presidential nominee, which meant in practice the next president of Mexico because of the lack of serious electoral competition” (p. 40). Before the *dedazo*, political observers and the general public discussed the unknown candidate as the *tapado*, or the covered one, as people remained unaware of who would be selected (Lomnitz & Gorbach, 1998). After the *dedazo*, the new candidate was described as the *destapado*, or the uncovered one (Lomnitz & Gorbach, 1998). In this mail art missive, PGN reconceptualized the undemocratic “uncovering” of Salinas

as the presidential candidate as an “artistic discovery.” The sarcastic congratulatory note in the missive thus emphasized how Mexico’s authoritarian party single-handedly selected the country’s next president.<sup>6</sup>

While the presentation of Salinas as an artistic discovery served as a reference to political events of the 1980s, PGN also explored earlier historical events at the bottom of the page: “2 oct ’68: son las 11 de la noche: ¿sabes tú donde están tus hijos?” (“Oct. 2 ’68: It’s 11 PM: do you know where your children are?”) (my translation). In yet another example of the dark humor associated with PGN, Bustamante and Mayer transformed the traditional public service announcement broadcast on Mexican television into a curious reference to the massacre of Tlatelolco. By asking recipients of the mail art missive about the whereabouts of their children on Oct. 2, 1968, PGN pointed towards the harrowing experiences of Mexican mothers during that night. Indeed, Elena Poniatowska’s *Massacre in Mexico* (1975) contains numerous testimonies of family members affected by the state’s violence against students. For example, Paula Iturbe de Ciolek, the mother of a murdered student, succinctly stated: “I feel as though I’m living a secondhand life” (Poniatowska, 1975, p. 155). Similarly, Carlota Sánchez de González, the mother of another victim, poignantly asked: “What am I going to do now with all the time I have on my hands for the rest of my life?” (Poniatowska, 1975, p. 155). Poniatowska’s book also included the memories of Isabel Sperry de Barraza, a grade-school teacher, who described the desperate ways in which mothers confronted state authorities during the night of the massacre:

All that night and all the next morning, mothers who didn’t have any idea what the whole nightmare at Tlatelolco was all about, who were desperate for information, who refused to believe anything they were told, searching for their children like animals who had been badly hurt, kept asking, “Sir, please, where’s my boy? Where have they taken the youngsters?” (Poniatowska, 1975, p. 155)

PGN’s mail art missive—despite the humorous presentation of Salinas as an artistic discovery—served as an artistic memorial for those affected by the massacre, emphasizing the historical moment in which state violence transformed the experience of motherhood for Mexican women. Moreover, by posing a direct question to the work’s recipients, PGN prompted audience members to confront the despair experienced by Mexican mothers, despite the government’s refusal to acknowledge the events of Tlatelolco (Flaherty, 2016).

PGN further explored the ways in which political violence altered the lives of countless Mexican mothers on the second page of the mail art missive (Fig. 2). The majority of the page contains handwritten text in which PGN define a term of their own invention:

La transmaternidad es: cuando por medio de la maternidad se pasa del mero espacio doméstico a la acción política; por ejemplo, cuando se desaparece a tus hijos o se les tortura, ¿o incluso cuando se les destapa como presidente? (Transmaternity is: when one moves from a mere domestic space into political action through motherhood; for example, while your children are disappeared or tortured, others are uncovered as president?) (my translation)

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<sup>6</sup> Despite PGN’s valid criticism of the role of the *dedazo* in Mexico, the 1988 election would become an unusually contested presidential race when politician Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas ran against Salinas (Langston 2017).

In this caption, the artists defined transmaternity as a transformative process experienced by the mothers of those who have been disappeared or tortured. PGN thus referenced the violent tactics deployed by the Mexican state in its dirty war against political activists (Calderón & Cedillo, 2012). As explained by Dolores Trevizo (2014), Díaz Ordaz “sustained a campaign against the left that was simultaneously overt, covert, reactive, and preemptive. President Luis Echeverría (1970-76) further escalated the violence that began to wind down, but did not completely end, with President José López Portillo (1977-82)” (p. 483). Moreover, PGN’s text served as another allusion to the *dedazo*, the process by which an individual politician became the *destapado*, or the uncovered presidential candidate. Indeed, PGN openly questioned whether their definition of transmaternity included the mothers whose children were “uncovered as president.” By referencing both political violence and the *dedazo*, PGN emphasized how the political hegemony of the PRI depended on the unrelenting violence of the dirty war. Moreover, by literally juxtaposing the photograph of the PRI’s presidential candidate with the definition of transmaternity on the reverse side of the paper, PGN implicated the future president of Mexico with the sorrow and despair experienced by Mexican mothers. While Salinas had not directly participated in the Tlatelolco massacre, his prominent position within the PRI implicated him within the long history of violence deployed by the party.

PGN’s artwork, however, not only condemned the political establishment but also celebrated how Mexican women had resisted the violence of the Mexican government. Within the handwritten definition of transmaternity, PGN presented a picture frame that contained additional text: “Nosotras en forma independiente re-postulamos a la más alta representante de la maternidad Rosario Ibarra de P.” (“We, in an independent manner, re-nominate Rosario Ibarra de P. as the highest representative of transmaternity”) (my translation). In this manner, Bustamante and Mayer purposefully countered the PRI’s *dedazo* by celebrating one of the most notorious women activists in late twentieth-century Mexico. Ibarra began her political activism in the mid-1970s after Jesús Piedra Ibarra, her son, disappeared; Piedra Ibarra had been accused of participating in the activities of the Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre, one of the paramilitary organizations viewed as an enemy of the state by the Mexican government (Maier, 2001; Trevizo, 2014). She later helped establish the Comité Pro Defensa de Presos, Perseguidos, Desaparecidos y Exiliados Políticos, commonly known as the Eureka! Committee (Maier, 2001; Trevizo, 2014). According to Trevizo (2014), the committee works towards granting amnesty to political prisoners in Mexico and is “comprised of family members of disappeared political activists, most of whom are the mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of disappeared activists” (p. 493). By describing Ibarra as “the highest representative of transmaternity,” PGN acknowledged her efforts to confront the injustices and violence of the Mexican government.

Despite the overt references to Mexico’s history and politics, PGN’s mail art missive resonated with the goals pursued by Mother Art, revealing the parallel ways in which feminist artists challenged gender inequality within specific geographic contexts. Both feminist art collectives aimed to challenge restrictive definitions of motherhood that circumscribed women to domestic tasks and caretaking duties. An early statement produced by the members of Mother Art detailed their approach to feminist art and their goals as mothers and artists (Mother Art, 1976). Mother Art (1976) stated that the group would “wipe away the strained smiles of forced roles” (para. 1) in order to “reflect the richness and variety of our own experience in our different lives” (para. 1). Mother Art thus created artistic projects that challenged the notion that mothers should selflessly devote themselves to household duties without participating in other activities. Through *Rainbow Playground*, the collective provided an important resource for mothers completing their

studies at the FSW. Additionally, *Laundryworks* provided an opportunity for mothers to enjoy an artistic performance while doing their laundry, broadening and transforming the experience of motherhood (Moravec, 2011). Through these artistic interventions, Mother Art fulfilled their stated goal of inventing their “own myths of motherhood” (Mother Art, 1976, para. 1), constructing a new definition of motherhood in the process. Similarly, PGN employed their artistic practice to challenge social conventions that restricted mothers to domestic settings. PGN’s mail art missive defined a form of motherhood—transmaternity—that considered the numerous women who moved “from a mere domestic space into political action.” The mail art missive thus challenged the ideal of domestic motherhood endorsed by government officials and institutions such as the Catholic Church in post-revolutionary Mexico (Blanco Cano, 2010; Mitchell & Schell, 2007; Olcott, 2005). PGN’s artwork celebrated the efforts of Mexican women who were both mothers and activists, paralleling the efforts of Mother Art to create artistic projects that reflected the diverse experiences of motherhood.

Despite the similarities between the goals of PGN and Mother Art, the perspectives expressed by the two feminist art collectives underscore the specific ways in which historical and geographic contexts affected their efforts. Mother Art (1976) emphatically positioned themselves as the harbingers of widespread social changes: “As Mother Art, we are beginning to make a revolution” (para. 2). This belief in the transformative potential of the visual arts aligned the collective with other feminist artists of the 1970s, particularly those associated with the FSW (Butler & Mark, 2007; Hale & Wolverton, 2011; Linton & Maberry, 2011). Indeed, in her discussion of feminist art and activism, curator Cornelia Butler (2007) emphasized the idealism of the movement in the 1970s.

In contrast, PGN’s artwork—produced in the midst of Mexico’s dirty war—has a more ambiguous perspective towards the future. At the bottom of the second page of the missive, PGN included a question that deliberately echoed the one on the first page: “2 oct. 2002: ¿sabremos nosotras donde están los nuestros?” (Oct. 2 2002: will we know where our [children] are?” (my translation). PGN thus remained wary of the possibilities for social change. In 1987—the year in which Bustamante and Mayer produced the mail art missive—the high-ranking government officials responsible for the massacre of Tlateloco had yet to face consequences. Similarly, even though the efforts of the Eureka! Committee contributed to the granting of amnesty for political prisoners in 1971 and 1978, hundreds of disappearances remained unresolved (Calderón & Cedillo, 2012; Trevizo, 2014). Consequently, PGN openly questioned what life in twenty-first century Mexico would be like.

## Conclusion

*Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity* serves as a unique example of the ways in which Mexican feminist artists participated in the development of feminist art in the later twentieth century. In this mail art missive, PGN explored the meaning and significance of motherhood, positioning their work among the projects developed by other feminist artists in the United States and Europe that explored these themes in their artistic proposals. Still, PGN’s exploration of political violence underscores how Bustamante and Mayer developed projects informed by their historical and political context. By emphasizing the effects of the massacre of Tlatelolco and the corruption of Mexico’s political establishment, PGN created a form of feminist art that explored the challenges faced by Mexican women of the post-1968 era. *Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity* highlights the need for feminist studies that recognize how activists and artists

work within specific local contexts, even as their efforts contribute to a larger transnational arena of feminist and artistic activity.

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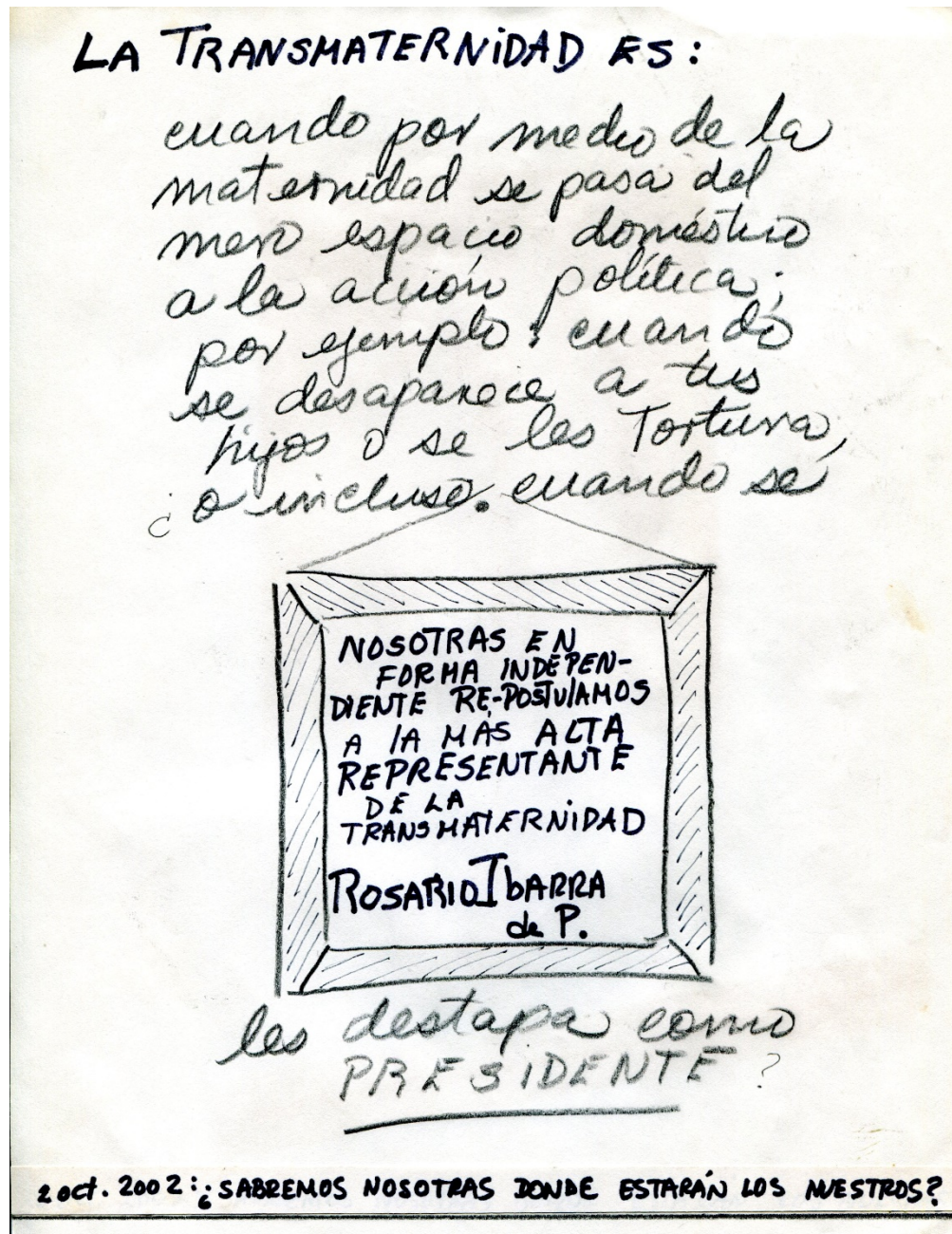
## Appendix

Figure 1. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Envío #6, Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad* (Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity), 1987, Mail Art, Mixed Media, 28 x 21.5 cm.  
Pinto mi Raya Archive.



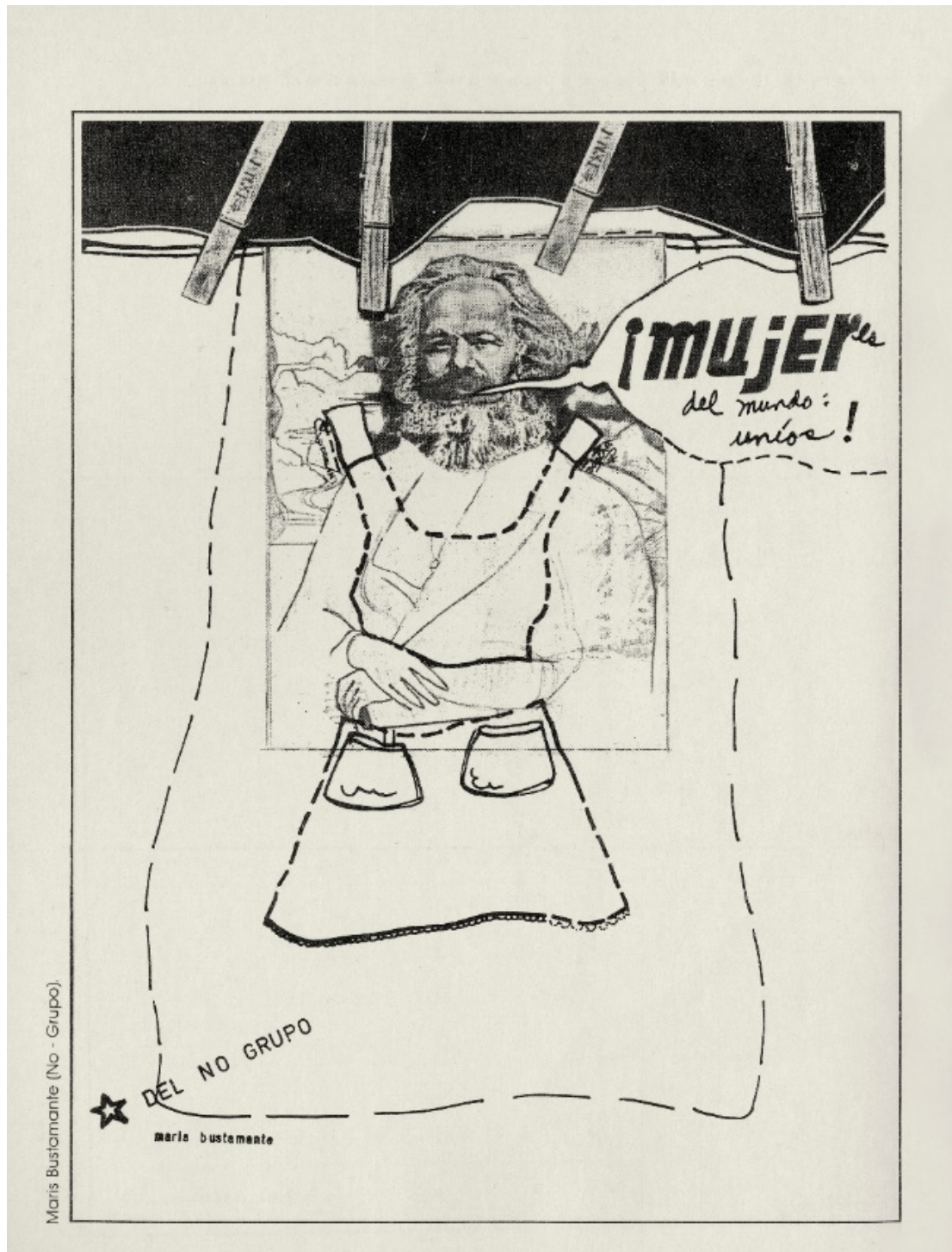


Figure 2. Polvo de Gallina Negra, *Envío #6, Más allá de la vanguardia: La transmaternidad* (*Beyond the Avant-Garde: Transmaternity*), 1987, Mail Art, Mixed Media, 28 x 21.5 cm.  
Pinto mi Raya Archive.





**Figure 3. Maris Bustamante, *Untitled [Mujeres del mundo uníos]*, Collage-based Reproduction Published in *Agenda Colombia* 83, 1982. Fondo No Grupo, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM.**



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